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Peer-Mentoring Program 'Pop-Up' Model for Regional Nursing Students

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Abstract

In late 2003, the regional campus of the University of South Australia initiated a peer-mentoring program aimed at assisting the smooth transition of new students to university life. In particular, the Nursing and Rural Health unit envisaged a program that would be effective and rewarding for both student mentees and mentors. This paper presents an analysis of the peer-mentoring program initiated. It begins by discussing the concept of mentoring and the advantages and disadvantages of peer-mentoring programs in educational institutions. It then introduces the program, describes how it was conceptualised, implemented and strengthened and how the program developed into a unique 'pop-up' model of mentoring that fitted the needs of mentees and mentors. The paper evaluates the experiences of mentees and mentors and concludes with some suggestions for improving the program, which others may learn from.

Key words: nursing education, first year academic experience, nursing students' transition to university, peer-mentoring, mentee-mentor relationship.

Background

Tertiary students are confronted with many challenges during their first year. According to one study of the first year experience of students in Australian universities (McInnis, James and McNaught, 1995, cited by Zeegers and Martin, 2001, p.35), '30% of the first-year students surveyed had seriously considered terminating their studies during first semester'. Moreover, a study in the United States estimated that 60% of students at public institutions fail to complete degrees within 5 years and crucial to success and completion is the first year college experience (Twigg, 2004).

The difficulties reported by Australian and American students resulting in discontinuing their enrolment include: 'curriculum overload, perception of poor teaching, loss of interest in the area of study and inadequate advice on academic problems' (Zeegers, 1994, and Seymour and Hewitt, 1994, cited by Zeegers and Martin, 2001, p.36). An important revelation from these studies is that '... commencing students are generally poorly prepared for the tertiary experience and may not be willing to persist when they encounter difficulties' (Zeegers and Martin, 2001, p.36). Another significant study was conducted at Charles Sturt University with first-year on-campus nursing students during the first semester in 1998 (Francis, Lemerle, Smith, and White, 1998). The study found that non-curricular experiences such as lack of peer support, poor time management skills, and loss of lifelong support networks, were associated with the ability to cope with the pressures of study, attitudes toward studies and ultimate success. Students do experience much stress and many challenges when entering tertiary education institutions.

In response to such challenges and similar to other universities, our university organises campus- and program-specific systems, which help students succeed in their studies. Some of these include: orientation activities (now called 'First Connection') to introduce new students to the university, its key people, and resources to support students; the employment of learning advisers who work very closely with students to enhance their academic skills; and encouraging maximal use of information technology. Our Whyalla-based unit has also introduced a number of initiatives to help students' transition and one of these is a peer-mentoring program, where second- and third-year nursing students act as mentors to support first-year students.

The primary goals of the pilot program were to assist the smooth settlement of first year nursing students into university life and help them perform well academically. It was envisioned that smooth transition and enhanced performance would be possible when the new student had a friend/s and/or moral supporter/s. Through this type of mentoring, the new student would be able to extend social contacts and be assisted in adjusting quickly and less traumatically as a beginning nursing student (White, 1999). The program aimed to build and strengthen rapport, camaraderie and communication between students, as well as develop personal and professional competencies in students. It aimed also to enhance learning and increase self-esteem. The new student would then be likely to continue pursuing tertiary studies. Through the program the mentor would also be afforded the opportunity to act and develop in this role.

Mentorship

Mentorship was introduced formally as a technique of students' induction into the tertiary education system only in the last decade or so (Carruthers, 1993). Factors such as industry-education partnerships and changes within the industrial culture and work ethic contributed to the use of mentoring programs as a means of inducting people into industry. These 'performance partnerships' (Cobb, Hensman, Jones, and Richards, 1995, p.68) have resulted in impressive alterations in the manner in which students are educated and taught the skills of their study or work environments.

Mentorship refers to a relationship between a mentor, who has experience and contextual knowledge of a situation, and a mentee, who is about to embark on the same or similar experiences or situations (White, 1999). It occurs when the 'new learner seeks a more experienced person for advice and guidance', in order to enhance his/her own knowledge and performance (Cobb et al., 1995, p.67). The learning process that transpires involves the new learner becoming socialised and acculturated into the university network and culture (Latham and Green, 1997).

Peer-mentorship may take several forms but regardless of the grouping or pairing the relationship is based on 'encouragement, constructive comments, openness, mutual trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share' (Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment, 1996, p.5). Carruthers (1993) distinguishes the advantages of mentoring for the mentee, mentor and the organisation. Some of these advantages for the mentee include acquiring knowledge and skills, being able to access the mentor's network, and obtaining a role model. On the other hand, for the mentor the advantages include gaining a sense of being needed, recognition of talents, and professional experience. The educational organisation is enriched as well with increased productivity and morale, better performance evaluations, improved recruitment and retention rates, and development of leadership qualities amongst students. There are also disadvantages and Carruthers (1993) enumerates these: elitism, overshadowing of less gifted students, inhibiting talent, jealousy, perceived threat and conflict, the pressure to make the process meaningful to each other, and the 'awe factor' exhibited towards the mentor (MacLennan, 1995, p.45).

Method

The Establishing of the Peer-Mentoring Program

Two staff members developed and implemented the program and were designated as program coordinators. They were to ensure the smooth harmonious relations between the students and provide adequate support for the mentors. The coordinators sent letters inviting the on-campus Whyalla second-year and third-year students to participate in the program as mentors. Then an induction program was conducted for those who expressed interest in becoming mentors. (See below for further details.) The mentees were recruited via an e-mail explaining the program and encouraging their participation. This was reinforced by some mentors meeting face to face with all the new students during orientation week.

The design of the peer-mentoring program was formal, including arrangement by faculty coordinators, the assignment of a mentor, and regularly scheduled meetings (Gaskin, Lumpkin, and Tennant, 2003). Mentors would engage in professional relationships with mentees as a group and would need to report back to the coordinators. The frequency and structure of liaison were agreed upon during the early meetings. A timetable for meetings was drawn up and minutes persons were assigned. The mentors decided to meet with the mentees one hour per week at the students' common room and mutually agreed to hold meetings when appropriate. As will be discussed later, these arrangements would be altered as the program unfolded, in response to what was suitable for the students involved.

The Induction of Mentors

During the induction program, each student was presented with an official badge, a congratulatory letter from the unit Head, and a learning package on peer-mentoring prepared by faculty (Oliver, White, and Penman, 2004).

The induction program clarified the roles of mentee and mentor (Claughton and Lloyd, 1995). It was important that the mentors realised that the infusion of their talents into the mentee-mentor relationship determined the success of the mentorship program (Hall and Kinchington, 1995). A mentor is someone who is first and foremost willing to take on the role and is there for the mentee. This person wants to be a peer-colleague, a co-learner, coach, and resource facilitator (Morton-Cooper and Palmer, 1993; Sullivan, 2004). A mentor is one who can share career goals and plans, help develop skills, discuss questions of a technical nature, and help a mentee 'grow' and 'blossom' to become an independent, self-directed, and highly motivated learner (White, 1999). The ideal qualities of the mentor were explained thoroughly.

The code of practice to be observed was discussed next. This section outlined good practices that would enable the relationship to work. The mentee and mentor should possess a positive self-concept, clear goals, and a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Both needed to have a shared understanding of the purpose and direction of the program and a commitment to work towards mutual outcomes (MacLennan, 1995).

Our induction program was delivered over two days. The learning and teaching methods used during the induction consisted of scenarios, role-plays, open discussion, peer-teaching and reflection. Students were also engaged in productive learning activities such as goal setting, valuing confidentiality, advisory and academic facilitation skills. It was important that mentors looked upon their role as being sign-posts between students and lecturers and the University. Moreover, mentors were instructed not to own the outcome but to facilitate learning by providing alternative courses of action instead of specific answers to problems. Also, examples of reckless advising by mentors that could harm a fellow student's study prospects were given.

Academic facilitation was explored by examining how the academic culture should be interpreted and how to tap into learning skills resources of the University. Mentees' issues about staff members were to be directed first to the staff concerned. The practical sessions provided opportunities for group work, team building, communication, and cooperation. The final task was to teach mentors practical self-management skills, such as stress and time management.

The Evolution of the Program

The first meeting of mentees and mentors was crucial and this occurred during First Connection week when new students were being orientated to the University. The mentors introduced themselves and the program and encouraged students to participate. They elaborated on the guidelines for engagement.

As it turned out, for most of the students, the initial design of the program was not suitable and another flexible, student-driven, and informal model emerged. The initial group mentoring changed to individual mentoring, which was a one-to-one learning support type of mentoring. Instead of face-to-face encounters, students met each other in different spaces and places, such as phone or email. The mentors made themselves available to the mentees by nominating days and times for consultations. Also, some mentors wanted to be consulted only on specific topics or area/s of 'interest'. Perceived or demonstrated areas of competence were mentors' areas of 'interest', for instance, web-based research or essay writing. The mentees were informed about these areas and were guided how to contact the mentors. This set-up is a variation of distance-type mentoring. Depending on learning support needs, a mentee could have one or more mentors.

The partnership that arose was instigated and maintained primarily by the mentee, who made contact on a regular basis, weekly initially then tapering off as the semester progressed, and possibly taking up the relationship as assistance was again needed during the study period.

The formal type of mentoring developed into a 'pop-up' model of mentoring where the relationship between the mentee and mentor existed in the background, surfacing intermittently for short periods and for specific purposes when mentees were challenged by the demands of tertiary studies.

The program closed at the end of the year. The mentee and mentor determined whether their relationship would continue. All mentees and mentors were requested to review and complete an evaluation of the program.

Evaluation of the 'Pop-Up' Peer-Mentoring Model

A descriptive-interpretative approach was used to evaluate the program using a brief questionnaire and exit interview conducted at the end of each year. Recruitment of the students who participated in the evaluation was undertaken via email, informing them about the purpose of the survey and providing instructions on how to participate in the evaluation. The participants were emailed a copy of the questions and asked to respond in a timely manner. Mentors were requested specifically to participate in the interview. (See Tables 1 and 2 for the questions.) Anecdotal accounts from lecturers and students were also sources of data. The responses were subjected to content analysis.

Completing the questionnaire or interview was taken as indicating consent. Permission was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee to incorporate the quotations from the responses of consenting students, who would not be identified in any way.

Results of the Evaluation

There were about 80 students who signed up as mentees over the two years. There were 16 mentors trained during that time. Generally speaking, the students who volunteered to become mentors were mature-aged, active in both academic and extra-curricular activities, and had satisfactory academic records, i.e. passing all courses. There were more second-year student mentors than third-year student mentors in both years. Some second-year mentors continued their role during their final year.

Eight mentees and 10 mentors evaluated the program conducted in 2005. The results of the evaluation are summarised in the tables below. These reflected the most popular answers.

Evaluation	Response
Did you approach a mentor in the past semester?	Yes 7 (87.5%) No 1 (12.5%)
If so, what concern/s did you raise?	First assignment (requested for proof-reading, comment on referencing and presentation of paper) Study of science (learning the words and concepts, how to pass the courses) Drug calculations Time and workload management How to strike a balance while studying and sustaining a family
What were the positive experiences in participating in the program?	Helped prepare for 'reality' Allayed fears Maintained motivation Overcame learning difficulties Learnt how to do things
What were the negative experiences in participating in the program?	No negative experiences No reply to request for support Difficulty with personality of a mentor
How did the program benefit you?	Encouraged to have people available to help Appreciated being told early about the demands of study and the amount of involvement required for each course Improved academic performance Enhanced knowledge Improved confidence Valued knowing about successful learning strategies Reduced feelings of isolation and self-doubt
What were the challenges or tensions?	No challenges or tensions Identifying areas where support was needed Hesitation to initiate contact to request support
How might the program be improved?	Introduce all mentors during the first week Have mentors write briefly about themselves Include off-campus students

Table 1: Summary of Responses Gathered from Mentees

Evaluation	Response
Were you approached by a mentee in the past semester?	Yes 7 (70%) No 3 (30%)
If so, what concern/s did you address?	Appropriate referencing in academic papers Drug calculations Specific topics on biosciences (e.g. function of liver and spleen) Strategies to learn science Time and workload management Others (e.g. purchase of books, scholarships available, university website navigation, placement experiences)
What were the positive experiences in participating in the program?	Opportunity for sharing knowledge and skills Development of teaching and mentoring skills Increase self-knowledge
What were the negative experiences in participating in the program?	No negative experiences Not being approached for assistance during the study periods No response to mentor initiatives
How did the program benefit you?	Saw things from another person's perspective Satisfaction of knowing that one is helping people Enhancement of self-development
What were the challenges or tensions?	No challenges or tensions Demands of own study Differing approaches amongst mentors
How might the program be improved?	No answer Improve dissemination to all beginning students Facilitate further contact between mentees and mentors by an on-line discussion page Emphasise benefits of the program and clarify roles of mentees and mentors

Table 2: Summary of Responses Gathered from Mentors

Discussion: The 'Pop-Up' Model of Mentoring

As tertiary education has been opened to the wider population, students participating in it have become more heterogeneous. Our University's broad selection processes have resulted in a widely diverse student population (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner, and Barrett, 1996). Whyalla nursing students are a mixture of recent school leavers, mature-aged students, students from Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, enrolled nurses, and students making a career change into nursing. Our students come to us with varying life experiences, maturity, information literacy skills, and degrees of preparation for university. This development obviously necessitates different strategies to address the heterogeneity of the student population. Depending on students' prior educational exposure, they may experience varying degrees of difficulty with the transition to university, requiring the implementation of strategies, such as this peer-mentoring program, targeting the needs of sub-groups in order to give them the best chance of academic success.

In addition to student diversity, there were other factors that contributed to a need to redevelop the peer-mentoring program. The rural setting, distance, demands of study and work, isolation and clinical placements were some of these factors. While most of our students come from Whyalla and surrounding areas, others come from far-flung regions. Regular meetings were not possible for many of these students. Also, students were not available to attend meetings during their clinical placements. Many of them were employed, while some were occupied by demands of study.

The 'pop-up' model afforded meetings between mentees and mentors that were private, informal, convenient, relaxed and without distraction from other students. The meetings and sessions were not compulsory. There were no formal rules except that strict confidentiality and mutual respect were to be observed. While the mentor endeavoured to help solve study-related problems, he/she was taught not to offer advice and guidance unless explicitly asked to do so. If the mentor was unable to assist, he/she referred the mentee to another mentor and/or coordinator. The program was inclusive as mentors were available to all first-year students, including academically at-risk students and/or students wanting to improve their learning skills.

The relationship evolved into being on a 'find out as you need' basis. This type of arrangement was superficial but practical. It did not lend itself to developing deeper engagements between students where they would talk about career goal setting, development of a variety of skills, educational needs and future directions, and personal reflections on their relationships. Perhaps this expectation is not appropriate at this level of mentoring. Nonetheless, it was evident from the results that there was much to be gained in participating in the program both as a mentee and mentor.

The program was strengthened by supporting mentors in a number of ways. Recognition of potential, provision of instruction and training, and calls for meetings were means of supporting mentors. Following debriefing, which occurred at the end of the semester, mentors were encouraged, affirmed, and commended for their involvement. If a mentor did something well, praise was given to reinforce commendable actions. In some cases, the coordinator was able to provide additional information to supplement what the mentor could provide, or give recommendations as to how to assist mentees, perhaps by referring them to support staff. Providing opportunities and responsibilities was also done, e.g. recommending mentors to act as paid tutors to students requesting for formal academic tutoring. Awarding of certificates of participation by the unit Head marked the close of the program.

The program was created in response to the perceived need to assist students to settle into university by continually developing and implementing innovative and productive learning and teaching activities. Mentoring allows the understanding of expectations and avoidance of mistakes (Gaskin et al., 2003). The value of the program was clarified and this could be categorised as enhancing personal and professional growth for both parties. The program has been successful in creating a climate conducive to shared learning. One mentor said, 'It was really like nursing.'

Enhancing Personal Growth and Development

Following interrogation of data, it was clear that the program had positively impacted on the mentees. Students were anxious about their capacity to produce academic papers, study and pass science courses, and demonstrate mathematical skills in drug calculations tests. Having a trusted colleague who experienced exactly the same dilemma and was willing to share his/her experiences and how he/she conquered fears and assuaged anxieties increased their morale and confidence and reduced isolation and self-doubt, especially for some mature-aged students. As they continued learning the ropes, they gained competencies in becoming university students and these encouraged them to widen their outlook, maintain their motivation, and improve self-reliance.

There were many positive aspects of participating in the program for the mentees, including the provision of peer support and social networks. It was encouraging for them to know that people were available to help. The program provided a safe learning environment, with opportunities to build social support and networks, and some students took up these opportunities. Research has shown that it is these non-curricular experiences that are important for coping in university (Francis et al., 1998).

In helping others, the mentors were pleasantly surprised at the personal benefits they gained as well. The satisfaction was both extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic came from the confidence and trust they inspired in the mentees they assisted, as well as the motivation they helped maintain amongst the mentees. More important for the mentors was the intrinsic satisfaction of knowing that they were helping co-learners. Moreover, mentors reported enhancement of self-development and self-knowledge. This was aptly expressed by one mentor who said, 'It heightens your interest and develops your love of teaching. You learn as you teach. It reinforces what you've learnt. It gives you the satisfaction in helping people, helping students fit into the University.'

Enhancing Professional Growth and Development

Participation in the program influenced learning. Social learning, characterised by learning from observation, imitation and modelling (Ormrod, 1999), must have occurred during the interactions between mentee and mentor. Much learning transpires in casual conversations and informal exchanges, removed from the expert or 'sage on the stage' type of learning.

From the mentees' perspectives, the program facilitated the smooth transition to university, as it helped readiness, prepare for 'reality', and overcame learning difficulties. During some engagements, pre-conceptions about university were explored providing a realistic overview of what it was like to be a university student. The mentees appreciated being told early about the demands of study and the amount of involvement required for each course. They valued knowing about successful learning strategies they might apply and this again improved their confidence. This was especially true in learning sciences as some students found this to be a huge challenge (Penman, 2005). Academic performance was improved as evidenced by good marks, and knowledge was enhanced for some mentees. Also, being able to identify areas of weakness or limitation and doing something about it by making things work for the individual were important for professional growth and development.

On the other hand, the mentors provided instruction, information, knowledge, skills teaching, and encouragement, but while doing these, they were enhancing their own growth and development. They affirmed their understanding and reinforced their learning; peer-teaching is the best way to learn (Biggs, 1991). The program afforded them the opportunity to practise their skills and learn mentoring skills. There were mentors who were not approached for assistance by any student or who were not successful in their attempts to engage with students, but these were part of the learning as well – the realisation that students would not necessarily take up available initiatives, even if these were potentially beneficial for them. In addition, they gained the ability to view things from a variety of perspectives. This ability to see another person's point of view could change the mentee and mentor as he/she expanded his/her approach and 'decentred oneself' (Cobbs et al., 1995, p.71). The relationship that eventuated had the potential to transform individuals following self-change and self-reform. This learning could be extrapolated to apply to future work situations involving clients coming from diverse backgrounds.

Areas of Improvement

It is vital to consider how the program could be improved for future implementation, although there were students who did not think this was necessary. There were 3 students who informed the coordinators that they were not aware of the program until late in the semester. This raises the issue of dissemination of information. As it is a new initiative, its diffusion is slow, but time, support and utilisation by other lecturers, and emphasising the benefits of participation would improve dissemination and uptake by beginning students. One mentee commented, 'Introduce all the mentors during the first week, not just one or two representatives.' Another mentee added, 'Have mentors write briefly about themselves so mentees could know them more personally and feel less threatened.'

The mentee-mentor interactions were observed to be greater during the first half than the second half of the year and this could be due to a number of reasons, including the successful adjustment made by the mentees. However, it was felt that the program should be reinforced during crucial periods (e.g. assignments due, mid-term exam) and throughout the year. The use of technology was suggested by a mentor who said, '... Perhaps we can facilitate further contact between mentees and mentors by an on-line discussion page. This is familiar and less confronting to students.'

A faculty member highlighted the need to give more recognition to the work undertaken by mentors. The program should allow the opportunity for them to reflect on their progress and improve on their future practice. It should provide ample opportunity to examine how their involvement has helped develop any of the graduate qualities the University is seeking to develop in its students, e.g. problem-solving, effective communication, being an independent and collaborative worker. Ways to sustain their interest should be explored and these could include supporting their participation in professional forums and tracking their development as mentors. Giving status and financial rewards through teaching and learning grants were also recommended by other staff.

Another strategy to improve the program is to address the negative experiences reported by some survey participants. A few negative aspects were uncovered and these related to failure of some mentors to reply to phone and email messages requesting support, and to differences in personality (e.g. one mentor being 'a bit overbearing' and 'using technical jargon' the mentee could not comprehend). These observations were fed back to the group and would be emphasised in the next induction program. Moreover, several mentors said that they were not approached for assistance during the study periods, which was disappointing for them. There were mentors trying to engage students by calling meetings and organising learning groups, but these were met with poor response and lack of interest.

Future induction programs would examine how communication between the two might be improved, and how mentors could be prepared to face disappointing experiences. Two challenges were reported by the mentees and these were their difficulty in identifying areas where they needed support and their hesitation to initiate contact to request support. Potential mentees need to be guided in these areas and an induction program for mentees may be profitable. On the other hand, the mentors cited demands of study and differing approaches amongst mentors as challenges and sources of tension. Also, the assistance requested of mentors, such as proof-reading, is not appropriate. A review of selection of mentors would be undertaken and the roles and strategies of mentors would be further clarified.

It was unfortunate that only a handful of mentees responded to the survey. Generalisations about the program would be difficult to make because of the low response. The results should be interpreted with caution, necessitating more evaluations before valid conclusions could be made about the program. Nevertheless, some valuable lessons were learnt which will better inform academics when planning for future peer-mentoring programs.

Future Directions

The suggestions volunteered by students will be given serious consideration. Future directions for this program include extending the program to benefit Whyalla external students and this may utilise the discussion groups as already cited by a mentor. A similar program, duplicated at the Mount Gambier Regional Centre where the Bachelor of Nursing program is also being offered, will be similarly evaluated. A more effective approach to program evaluation will be examined to increase student participation in the evaluations.

Under the teaching and learning portfolio, a generic peer-mentoring program will be created which will be applicable for other disciplines in the Centre. Our experience here will help in creating the generic program. Successful programs are those with clear and measurable objectives and more emphasis will be given to the benefits, roles, and engagement in disseminating the value of the program. Involvement of other faculty members will also be explored.

Conclusion

This paper reports on a mentoring program operating at the nursing unit of the Whyalla Campus. One facet of the program is the unique 'pop-up' model that emerged, which other disciplines might consider adopting. The 'pop-up' model was approached by some students with enthusiasm, creativity and with a sense of ownership because it was beneficial, flexible, student-driven, and practical. Overall the program achieved its objectives and provided opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. The program is continuing in 2006.

Student evaluations of the program reflect the value of the mentoring experience. Results of the evaluations, constrained by the low number of responses, revealed that both mentees and mentors benefited. The areas of the program needing improvement will be carefully addressed.

The benefits of the information derived from the program are many. The evaluation will inform academics of the significance of peer-mentoring programs in providing support to incoming nursing students. It will direct us to develop new schemes and maximise utilisation of available resources to better assist students in their studies. This program is one way of lifting academic performance, improving student retention and avoiding nurse training wastage.

It is a worthwhile program as reflected in the willingness of the participants to continue assisting new learners for next year. Some mentees are now willing to assume the role of mentor. These students believe that their contribution could make a positive difference to a new student. One third-year student mentor said that he plans to continue mentoring in the hospital during his graduate nurse course, while another mentor has commenced tutoring first-year student nurses, owing to the confidence she gained as a mentor.

Mentoring has been described as '... an investment in the future. It acts on a belief in the potential of our colleagues and students and implies a willingness to share the beauty of our dreams' (McMahon, 2005, p.195). It is this view that we plan to work around in our 'pop-up' peer-mentoring program.

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